

Dewey Browning: I'll tell you how I got started over there because all the people in the united mineworkers. I'd heard of them as a boy. We had an Armageddon there.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Dewey Browning: Amazing. Is it on now?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Dewey Browning: Well, me and Rich Brown, he came to me and asked me to go over and – we had an uncle over at Ottawa. And he asked me and went over there and make better money with united mineworkers organization. I said yeah, I'd like to be in a united mineworker. So he – both Logan, we both lived in Omar. It was coal in West Virginia then. So we got down to Logan and had to ride a train to Ethel. That was as far as the train went at that time. And we had to walk from Ethel to Blair.

Interviewer: Is that so?

Dewey Browning: Oh yeah. There's a wagon route over the hill but no cars could make it.

Interviewer: How long did that take you?

Dewey Browning: Oh let's see. It took us at least near two hours to walk from Ethel to or maybe more to Blair. And then we had to wait on a train to take us to Ottawa. In other words we started out pretty early in the morning and it was later when we got to Ottawa. And Uncle Ott used to own a place of business there and he used to work out front and soda pop and so on. Next morning I went down to coal mines and asked for a job and they told me they needed a brakeman. And I remember he told me he was awful young. I told them well, you give me the job and I'll show you how you do it. So he did. So a fellow the name of Dick Whitfield was the motorman. And Connelly was his brakeman and he used two brakemen on his motor. It was such a hard job that had to have two brakemen. But we worked fine. All worked and the strike, comes the time of the strike and they begun talking about they was going to have fights and told them C30 pistols and had around.

Interviewer: Now when was this that they went out on strike?

Dewey Browning: I don't remember the year but it was just before that Blair Mountain fight.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Dewey Browning: And so I keep talking to them but I was young. And one of them old heads told us we're going to have a war. And I said who's doing that? How do you mean? Well, said we're going to have a strike and said the coal companies is not going to give us a raise. Well, was already making a dollar and a half more in a day over there and working two or three hours less.

Interviewer: Over at Blair?

Dewey Browning: Over at Blair and Cold River. They called it Cold River but it's not on Cold River. Well there was Cabin Creek, they was organizing, Paint Creek was organizing and all up through that way was unionizing mineworkers. All the Cold River was united mineworkers and this was United Mineworkers. So I got a job working and then after I got a job they made a contract for a certain amount. And Keeney and Mooney was the bosses here in – this is district 19 in Charleston.

Interviewer: 17 isn't it?

Dewey Browning: Oh 17. Well, Keeney was the president and vice president. They come in to talk to us and things was getting rougher and rougher and rougher. Well, I was just a little boy and my brother lived in Omar and brother, caught that train, and walked over the hill and went back to Omar. Last day I remember we worked. And from that they begin to, the iron forces begin to – the men over here, deputies and then they was talking war over here too.

Interviewer: Now just a sec. I want to make sure I get this straight. You went back to Omar to get out of the trouble.

Dewey Browning: Yeah, and dodging the fight.

Interviewer: You wanted to get out of the trouble.

Dewey Browning: Yeah. Because heck, I want to – I knowed you can't win by shooting. And so I come on back over here and I go to Blair Mountain. I go to Blair Mountain and fight or go to jail. Well, I stalled them on that. So I went down to Crooked Creek and Crooked Creek is going the direction of Cold River too and they had men up ahead of Crooked Creek on that mountain and they had men at Blair. And I don't know where, they had those two.

So I went out there and the coal company I'd been working there and I told him I'd guard the camp there if they wanted me to to keep the fight away. And so they put me to guarding it. They thought they was breaking in one night. And we went down to the river, went down to little Crooked Creek and we all camped out. Everybody in the camp, I think everybody at Crooked Creek camped out that night. Well, the next morning the soldiers come in on the train. Of course I'm missing some of it. But soldiers come in on the train the next morning and they pulled in at Peace Creek first and stopped. Some of them –

Interviewer: Hang on. Thank you. He's going to get on the tape and not you.

Dewey Browning: Oh cut it off now. Cut the tape off now.

Interviewer: Oh ok.

[Break in Audio]

Dewey Browning: I may be missing some of it. Of course it went on a long time before they come in. But 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning they come in. And I kept stalling them, keeping them fighting on this side. It's either fight or go to jail. And so the soldiers come home. We laid out that night and camped out that night oh 150 people. We stayed on the river and some laid in the sand, some took quilts and pillows and so on. Of course they're kids, young.

Interviewer: Now let me ask you another question. All of you that were over at Crooked Creek camping out there were you trying to keep from having to serve with the Don Chatham's forces there.

Dewey Browning: Yeah. That's right. I was trying to keep moving on the mountain. So I was going I said and guarding them down there. So I had me a pistol, rifle and we took it. Of course it was a good thing to have with all of us down there. But the soldiers come in the next morning. So I never did work. I never did guard on the – I dodged it and dodged the other side because I knew you couldn't win by shooting. You can't win by shooting. So and the soldiers they – some of them got off, they said some got off at Mill Creek and some got off at Crooked Creek. Then some at Crooked Creek, the soldiers did. And next town some did. And then some they said went on to Blair Mountain.

I know where Billy Marsh got killed. There was a little old garden up on top of Blair Mountain and you'd hop up there now and straight over there. But it's growed up and thick. There was a little

old garden over there and he used to be mine foreman over at Omar and I used to work for him and he's an awful good fella. But he was a good, but he was a mine foreman but he was a good united mineworker too.

Interviewer: So he was fighting against Chatham?

Dewey Browning: Yeah. He's fighting against these operators over here.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Dewey Browning: Tell you the truth about it. First stop it and I'll tell you something.

[Break in Audio]

Interviewer: You told me that you stayed out of the fight there because you felt that the kind of things that the union – the best way to organize was not forcibly.

Dewey Browning: That's right. You couldn't fight. You could shoot it out.

Interviewer: How do you think would have been the best way for them to have organized down here in Logan County?

Dewey Browning: Well to stay out on strike and do it in – of course it's impossible to – it's impossible to organize in Logan County at that time.

Interviewer: Why was that?

Dewey Browning: Why, they'd put you in jail. They'd beat you up. They'd maybe kill you. And they did kill men in my opinion. And they put them in jail and beat them up and beat them up. Now over in Cold River if we just got a break from everybody and they'd give us something to stay out on. Then we could win the fight. We could win them.

But they couldn't afford to pay us more because they showed us on the books they lost money with John L Lewis. He fired these two men because they went and they told him that. So it was impossible. It was impossible for them to pay the price he was asking. Because over here all scabs working day and night, just day and night at a coal company over here.

Interviewer: Were the wages a lot better at the union mines?

Dewey Browning: No. Cheap, say cheap. Lord, the union they'd get work for over half the price they had to pay over there. And John L Lewis he asked the companies for a dollar and a half raise on some of the men and a dollar. And they already some of them went broke in this organization because they had to pay the men too much. So it was impossible for them to ask for more wages.

But the coal company absolutely offered us a new contract, the same contract at the same price. I don't remember whether it was one year or two year grievance. John L Lewis, we sent Keeney and Mooney to Washington and John L never asked a word. They fired him when they knocked on the door and he seen who it was and told them get out. Let the, stick them on the side tracks. Get out. You're fired. I'll send you to _____, arrest them.

Interviewer: Who came in as district president after Keeney and Mooney were fired?

Dewey Browning: They didn't have any. No more union. They didn't give us nothing to eat. They didn't give us no beans, no taters, nothing. Three weeks after that every coal company was running scab miners. That's the way it ended up.

Interviewer: What year was that? Do you remember what year that was?

Dewey Browning: I don't know for sure. I really don't know for sure. But I kept my union card for years and years and years. And I worked at Ottawa Number 3 and you go over there now and see the old pier in the creek with the tipple. Went across that. That's where I used to work at.

Interviewer: So I take it that they didn't finally organize around here until Franklin Roosevelt.

Dewey Browning: Franklin Roosevelt gave them the right to. And the first joiners in Henlawson.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Dewey Browning: Henlawson. I went to Henlawson and joined and we joined there the first day. His argument was the president but Loudon White put his self in as president. And we all joined the union at Henlawson. And that was – we thought anyway that was the first president, first local organizing in the county.

Interviewer: Oh is that so?

Dewey Browning: Yeah. And then they all – they ended up putting them in jail and a lot of them put in jail. First thing you know he turned them all out and organized and went to work.

Interviewer: So I take it guys were pretty much ready to join the union in 1933 when they had a chance then.

Dewey Browning: Oh when they had a chance. Yeah, yeah. They sure did. The men all – and I'll tell you right now all union, nearly all union men here, real good union there. They mean right. They wanted to do right. We got a few there that do anything that Tony Bowles would ask them to. And they do it by the wrong and I noticed in this last election some new fellow hollering for Tony Bowles that his staff is all dressed up and bought him a new automobile.

I asked him what is that Tony Bowles money? Because I was keeping kind of quiet then because I was trying to collect my, trying to get my pension. He promised me he'd pay it after the election. This race is over. He said this – stop that this minute and I'll tell you something else.

[Break in Audio]

Interviewer: I understood that Bill Blizzard was like one of the leaders of this march that came down to Logan, one of the leaders at the battle of Blair Mountain there. Did you know if Bill Blizzard was involved?

Dewey Browning: I don't think. No, Bill Blizzard wasn't into that. Never heard of him in that. Bill Blizzard, I don't think was ever in that march. I don't believe he was. If he ever was I never heard his name mentioned. And Keeney and Mooney stayed in the clear and they was never heard of during this fighting much. I don't believe they approved of it. See, them men armed over there. That freight train backing in and all that and pistols riding the freight train or riding the passenger train and the conductors say to them ticket, and they'd say, "Here's my ticket" and point their gun. I knew that could... [trails off]

Interviewer: Now you were telling me that –

Dewey Browning: Our union had guns. I was one of them. I wasn't into that. I would have been I guess if I'd had the chance to ride one of them trains and got a gun. I was just a boy and I was so excited about united mineworker that I knew it when I got in it.

Interviewer: You're telling me that gun thugs kind of like infiltrated the united mineworkers.

Dewey Browning: Over there in this first union.

Interviewer: How did that happen?

Dewey Browning: Well, I don't know why. I don't know where they got the orders to carry the guns. I don't know where they got their guns from to start the fight. I don't know where that come about. Of course when they had that meeting there with it, politics meeting I found out pretty well. I just had to imagine now where they're coming from. I really don't know. I know some of the best united mineworkers in the country was in on that. But they was honest. They thought they was going to come through here and wander Logan County and onto Mingo County. Some of the men thought they was doing the right thing. But they was armed just like soldiers. I knew that wouldn't work. You can't win a United Mineworker battle with guns.

Interviewer: So I want to hear more about what you were doing. You and – you came back down here to Crooked Creek.

Dewey Browning: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you and your friends went and camped out,

Dewey Browning: Yeah. Camped out and I had the easy good job guarding the people of Crooked Creek or going to Blair Mountain. And I told them – I lied to them. I told them that Don Chatham sent me down there. I got my guns and my high power and the pistol and went on down to Crooked Creek where I was well acquainted. And I told the coal company down there that don sent me down to guard the camp. And of course –

Interviewer: Why was it that Don wanted the camp guarded?

Dewey Browning: He didn't. He told the camp to get out, I mean he sent word to get out. And we went to the river that night because we thought they was coming, breaking over. And I didn't want to go to Blair Mountain. So I took my old high power and pistol and went on down the river with the other people. And they didn't like that because I had the high power gun and the pistol – of course they all know me. But they didn't – they was all in favor of the union. See. Most every one of them down there was in favor of the union but they was afraid of saying that.

Interviewer: Well, that's interesting. How many people in Logan County – how many of the miners were behind the union at that point? I know it was probably hard to tell because –

Dewey Browning: It's hard to tell but I'd say the thick if they got a chance that it would have been 85 out of 100 or more inside the union that they'd afraid.

Interviewer: You mean that they're afraid to talk about it.

Dewey Browning: Oh afraid to talk about anything. See. I had that union card all the time, kept it hid. And if they knew I had that union card well, I couldn't held a job nowhere in the county. So I dodged both fights 'cause I couldn't figure that you'd win fighting with guns. But I called and said – see, they didn't send me down there to guard. They signed me up to go to Crooked Creek see the head of Cold River.

There was some men on that side trying to come through and some on Blair Mountain and some somewhere else up in there. But they thought at Logan when I got my rifle and my pistol they thought I was going to the front. But I went around and told them that Don sent me down there to guard the camps. So I stayed out of it.

Interviewer: That's the smartest thing I ever heard.

Dewey Browning: Yeah. I told them. I said he sent me down here to guard the people here at the camps. There I was.

Interviewer: That's pretty clever. That's very smart.

Dewey Browning: I don't know if there was a telephone at that day and time at Crooked Creek. I don't believe it was. So no connections, no way to find out.

Interviewer: So anyways Don Chatham had no way of knowing what you were really up to.

Dewey Browning: No. I was dodging the front because I wasn't going to go there. I'd go to jail first. I'd lost my – if they sent me to jail they'd make me never work in the county. Because they run them fellows out they sent to jail. Now that is the fact. They beat them up and they killed some of them.

Interviewer: Did Chatham ever find out afterwards what you had been up to?

Dewey Browning: If he did he never said nothing about it. I kept my 3030 and my pistol. They did ask me where it was at and I told them I lost it down in the river and kept it. They noticed – I guess they thought I was lying them. But I didn't get that. Come over there killing that 3030 and didn't know it was so powerful, this big old tree. And I said to him get behind that tree and hold the egg in the tree and I'll shoot and see if you can hear it jar. He said, "it might be hollow. I ain't that big of dope." I said, "It ain't hollow. Let me show you."

I just aimed that little 3030. Bam. Boy, the dirt flew way up. He said, "You see that. That tree is hollow or you missed it." And I looked at that and that bullet was straight through there and I got so weak that– If he'd have got behind that tree I would have shot him. I wouldn't thought it was going through a sycamore tree. Why it was three foot thick. Of course sycamore is soft wood. But I never knew that. I bet you he can tell you about that yet.

Interviewer: I bet he can. I bet that stands out in his memory.

Female: Which one?

Dewey Browning: Toyo, Toyo. Told him to get behind the tree and see if it would jar him. He said, "Well, that's a high power gun. Said it might be hard and might go through and kill me." That made me so weak I couldn't understand and we'll try that out later and got a rail and shot a rail, them steel rails down there at the railroad track on Crooked Creek. And absolutely one of them fellows shot through the little part of that steel. You know how that ball sits up in that little part down there. Them guns would shoot through that steel rail.

Interviewer: They were real strong I guess.

Dewey Browning: Yeah. Well, I don't know what – I'll tell you right now. It was rough in them days. There was no question. And I mean it was dangerous.

Interviewer: I want you to go back for a minute to the beginning of your career as working in the mines. When was it that you first heard about the united mineworkers?

Dewey Browning: Well, I heard about them when I was about 13 years old. I went to work up by drying sand at number four tipple. I'd go to school and I'd come home and they'd give me a quarter a day to dry sand. And that tickled me 'cause you get to handle them motors, sand

load up and got the trailer pulled up and move it up and get another one. And young boy and I wanted to handle them motors. And they give me a quarter a day to dry sand. That's the worst thing in the world on your lungs, dried my hand, the old coal stove hopper thing. You'd pour the sand in there and there was a stove between that hopper and you'd keep it burning and that sand would dry. You'd have to take it and had a little poker thing there that you –

Interviewer: I'm trying to understand. Why did you want to dry out the sand?

Dewey Browning: So the motors, using them in the mines, the motor can't pull nothing without sand.

Interviewer: I see.

Dewey Browning: See? You put these sand boxes, got sand levers and you open that sand up makes the motor pull. And without them you can't hardly stop them. It will slide and spin. But that's what the sand is for. And then I went from that. I went to – soon as I got to be about 14 years old, quit school, went to couple cars on top. None of – see, learn to couple cars and soon you make a base. You learn how to put a car on the track and you learn how to couple them when they hit. And that's what started me out in the coal mine.

I didn't understand why – I paid my dues and my time had started. My boss was from here to Logan and back was calling us up celebrating because we organized. Pay my dues up till not and I can't understand why that they wouldn't give me my paycheck. Only like WJ Hines told me that I was black balled through the head union in Washington DC from the general mine foreman because he's mad and me.

Interviewer: What was it that you done that made him mad?

Dewey Browning: Well, I was been married twice. I was young, my wife was young and I drank a little. And he'd want me to give him – he wouldn't ask for it but he'd hint for whiskey and he'd come around and he'd try to rip you out and I'd run him off. And a lot of those folks wouldn't do it. They could have any kind of job they wanted. Now WJ Hines wasn't that way but Millard was. Millard was rotten. And he – so that's why him -- Millard never liked me at all.

And I can prove right now the man is living and he's still up at Omar. Sometimes he'd get mad at me one thing and lay me off or fire me. Not lay me off but some other job but load motors, sparky 13 he called it. Number 13 he called it sparky. It would spark

because it run on the rails and especially when you put sand on the track. And I held the record for the past a year pulling more coal that old motor than the rest of the men with the good motors. He'd keep me on that old motor because wanting me to quit.

Of course the section bosses I worked for, they liked me. No question about it. They wanted me to work for them all the time because if you was section boss and don't bring tonnage you won't be section boss long. I brought the tons because I'd always be working. Fred Cooke I understand that he died drawing the miner's pension. I was told that. But he was my boss at one time. And this fellow, Compton, Compton, he's dead. I don't care to tell it now. They asked me why I didn't tell it before they died. I said well, I'd rather see a mine's worker draw the pension than I would them son of bitches steal it in Washington so I wouldn't tell them.

Jessop, he's dead now and Jeff Ralston, One Arm Jeff. He never hit a lick in the coal mines since 1928. And I understand he drew the miner's pension. I'd like to know if Huddleston, he was – there's still on it. I'd like to know if Huddleston, the guy that's up for killing ____, I'd like to know did he, is he drawing a pension. Do you know or not?

Interviewer: I don't honestly know.

Dewey Browning: Well, now in my opinion he is because he's on that court trial Tony promised one of them to give his dad, to give him pension when this is over and he hadn't done that. They said they couldn't break the contract. They claimed I didn't have – I showed them 22 and a half years. But they didn't give me the 65 percent. But when I got my bank roll the last day I worked the coal mines and they didn't give me no credit for that. They turned me down. So I've been, I think WJ Hines told me the truth with what he told me that I was blackballed. That's the boy that comes here. He's our neighbor. He's a pretty good old boy.

Interviewer: Well, you'll just have to bring all that up with Mr. Miller tomorrow. When you go to that rally.

Dewey Browning: Yeah. I want to talk to him. So I think now they ain't getting enough tons right now. They ain't getting enough tons to pay these old miners their pensions due to them. And I'd like to see an old constitution, united mineworker constitution like back in the '20s.

Interviewer: Well, I'll tell you what. I'll try to hunt one of those up and I'll see if I can bring it over and show it to you. I don't know if I can find one.

Dewey Browning: Well, I appreciate it because one united mineworker couldn't do nothing against another one in that contract. Now there's no such thing as that now.

Interviewer: Right. You were going to tell me when it was that you first heard of the union.

Dewey Browning: Yeah, when I was drying sand and fellows just talk about it, I hear fellows talk about it.

Interviewer: I see. Now these weren't union organizers, but they were just –

Dewey Browning: No.

Interviewer: Other guys working in the mines.

Dewey Browning: Just a talking, that the union didn't have to work for so many hours and you'd quit and go home so much. And we had to work till we got on this thing and another. And then we'd be working on the tipple. After I got up on the tipple, why, some of them would be talking about it. Of course they wouldn't talk for you get three or four or something. But sometimes we'd have to work 12 – 14 hours and they'd just give us our 8 hours or it was 9 hours then. But they'd give us 9 and sometimes we'd work – oh many times I worked and come in at 11:00 at night and get back the next morning and had to –

It was then that we had to be, have the motor all sanded up and ready to go at 6:30 in the morning, leave the drift mound and we worked on the cleanup shift what they called it. And a lot of nights 9:00, 10:00 and sometimes after 11:00 when we worked that late and have to go right back if they was running the next day. We had to go right back and do the same thing over again. Lots of time we'd be waiting on empties and we'd lay down just in an old gob of coal as a bed and sleep 15 – 20 minutes when you have time waiting on it.

Interviewer: Geez. You just don't know how you even got enough rest to go back to work.

Dewey Browning: That's right.

Interviewer: A solid day the next day.

Dewey Browning: When the mines worked five days a week, the man was just almost dead on his feet when the weekend come.

Female: They did work six days a week.

Dewey Browning: Not. Well, sometimes it was special order or something. But the men just, they just couldn't stand up to it. Some of them did stand up but some of them had to miss on account of the rest and sleep. Of course I doubled a lot after. I was always good and strong working. I was really, almost fell asleep in a motor. Running, I got the motor running, cutting machine. Many times I went to sleep with the coal cutting machine. It makes a big noise and it's a level noise. You know when it starts its all the same kind of noise and you just –

Interviewer: Was that dangerous if you went to sleep on the job like that?

Dewey Browning: Well, you'd liable to get killed. You're liable to get killed if you go to sleep. The machine might cut out or something and knock a timber or you didn't stop where you was supposed to stop. That's 'cause many a man got killed because he worked so much in the mines he'd fall asleep and things would happen. A lot of men went to work on them motors would go to sleep, get killed. Killed people because they'd fall asleep. You know when the mines –
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